

Mercury high in Japanese town that hunts dolphins

May 9 2010, By JAY ALABASTER , Associated Press Writer



Dolphin sashimi, raw slices from the breast of a striped dolphin, is served during lunch at Moby Dick, a hotel run by the local government, in Taiji, southwestern Japan, Sunday, May 9, 2010. Residents of Taiji, the dolphin-hunting coastal village depicted in the Oscar-winning documentary "The Cove," have dangerously high mercury levels, likely because of their fondness for dolphin and whale meat, Japan's government said Sunday. The levels of mercury detected in Taiji residents were above the national average, but further tests have found no ill effects from the mercury. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

(AP) -- Residents of the dolphin-hunting village depicted in the Oscar-winning documentary "The Cove" have dangerously high mercury levels, likely because of their fondness for dolphin and whale meat, Japan's government said Sunday.

The levels of mercury detected in Taiji residents were above the national

average, but further tests have found no ill effects, according to the National Institute for Minamata Disease. The tests it conducted involved hair samples from 1,137 of the town's about 3,500 residents.

"The results suggest there is a connection between hair mercury levels and eating cetaceans," Director Koji Okamoto told reporters at a town hall.

Environmentalists have long protested Taiji's dolphin slaughter and Japan's whaling activities and have taken up the mercury issue as part of their cause. Many cetaceans are at the top of their food chain, which makes their mercury levels higher because they accumulate it from all the fish lower in the [food chain](#).

"If you're eating dolphin meat, you're eating poison, and if you're eating a lot of dolphin meat, you're eating a lot of poison," said Louis Psihoyos, director of "The Cove." He spoke to the AP by phone from Los Angeles.

About 100 Taiji residents who gathered Sunday morning at a town hall meeting were told that there was no need for most of them to change their diet, although future tests are necessary.

At lunch after the meeting, town council chief Katsutoshi Mihara rejoiced as he carefully dipped raw slices of a striped dolphin into soy sauce.

"This may seem nonchalant, but I have absolutely no concerns, and I want to be able keep my lifestyle," he said.

As served at "Moby Dick," a hotel run by the local government, the red and pink dolphin sashimi was chewy and faintly fishy, its consistency more like meat than fish.

Institute officials said neurological tests on the 182 citizens who wanted them found no problems. Follow-up tests are planned by March of next year, with outside experts possibly invited, and tests are under way to track mercury levels in the local catch.

Mercury poisoning is a sensitive topic in Japan, where a disorder now called Minamata Disease was linked to a chemical company that dumped tons of mercury compounds on a southern island.

The disease causes spasms, sensory loss and limb malformations in newborns and can be fatal. The pollution continued for years after it was discovered, and Minamata disease became an international symbol of environmental damage and corporate corruption.

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Citation: Mercury high in Japanese town that hunts dolphins (2010, May 9) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-mercury-high-japanese-town-dolphins.html>

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